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Complex learning and the World Religions Paradigm: Teaching Religion in a Shifting Subject Landscape

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Abstract

This chapter aligns pedagogical practice with the demise of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). The chapter examines category construction and the role of WRP in the study of religions and provides learning strategies that show how the analysis of category construction and deconstruction can be a core mode of teaching. For teachers this is a challenging process of leading students through super-abundant information and providing direction against a dissipating category. For students of religion, the complexity of perspectives and knowledge bring about uncomfortable uncertainty. The chapter shows how structural processes of category formation can be set against pedagogies of deconstruction in a complex network of learners, resources and teachers.

Introduction: A World without World Religions?

The intellectual history of the idea of world religions involves a complex interplay of historical, political, cultural and academic discourses (see, for example, Masuzawa 2005a, 2005b; Owen 2011; Segal 2007). It has become a stream of knowledge accepted and implicit in common understanding and curricula. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* includes an entry for 'World Religions' which, though it is written by a key challenger to the paradigm, notes its ubiquity (while stating it is not a 'technical term', and identifying different uses of the term, Masuzawa, 2005b). World Religions has become a category paradigm in social understanding: it is often used uncritically, occasionally reflectively as a useful shorthand, or a pointer to varied patterns of behaviour and belief. It is an umbrella term for diverse phenomena. In the study of religions, the term 'religion' is also generally understood as an umbrella term, a lexical signifier for diversity.

As will be discussed below, category construction requires such 'shorthands'. But knowledge and understanding require reflexive application – even as we use knowledge to develop greater understanding we critically reflect upon the substance of that knowledge. Academic study requires an eternal return to its foundations, modes and representations. Just so, in the study of religions students and tutors begin, repeatedly with each new year's intake, defining, challenging and investigating the primary category of religion. The study of religions is the subject of study and the cumulative history of a variety of approaches to a subject area. It is also a discourse that critically considers itself as an object, and that is the beginning of the pedagogic enterprise for undergraduates; it is ideally the key topic of the first class of the first module introducing the study of religions.

The study of religions is concerned to critically consider the labels and categories used in discourses on religion. Matters of what these phenomena should be called and who has the authority to decide, insiders or outsiders, are core to this academic project. At a deeper level, the effects of these categories are also a serious area of consideration. To what extent are they accurate representations? How much do they mould disparate phenomena within the boundaries of an external category? How much do the categories exclude? And to what extent are the borders and liminalities an affective part of the category? There is, within this analysis of categories, a linguistic and philosophical question about the relationship between language and the 'world'. Epithetical responses to this question include Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational linguistic observation that the sign is not the signified (1974). Jonathan Z Smith emphasized this point with the epithet 'map is not territory' (1978). Both de Saussure and Smith provide an important epistemological warning for the study of religions: signs and maps are constructs created by scholars of religion from their (equally constructed) evidence base, that which is signified, or the 'territory'. The substance of knowledge is attained in the field. Perhaps it might be argued that this perspective, simply described, offers an unsophisticated philosophy of language by separating perception of the world from the linguistic bases by which humans bring the world into being – when there is a much more symbiotic relationship between the world and language. As Russell McCutcheon states, in relation to the terms religion and religious experience,

> It could be persuasively argued that the only reason scholars find religions everywhere in the world, and religious experience in everyone's heads, is because those very scholars approach the world – in fact *make* their world – by using this term, defined broadly enough, so as always to find sufficient things that they can deem/group together as religion – suggesting to me that a theory of *deeming* (i.e.

> a theory of signification) and *grouping* (i.e. a theory of classification) are far more required than theory of religion. (2012, 88)

However, the view that map is not the territory includes a moral injunction to treat the objects of study, the territory, as preeminent. Categories such as linguistic signs and maps have a dangerous and bewitching tendency to supersede that which they purport to describe. The World Religions Paradigm (WRP) is a sign that shapes understanding of religion in the world. It does not disinterestedly paint a picture of the world, but helps to construct the picture.

Students should be pointed toward a primary understanding that categories and discourses offer lenses of perception, and that these lenses are subject to change, and to choice. As Craig Martin has observed, 'getting past the common-sense view of language is the first step to high-quality, critical scholarship' (2012, 21). This critical revaluation of terms and categories, such as 'world religion', is an imperative for academic development and pedagogical intent. In common discourse, and still in much of the study of religions, the map of the world is coloured by areas labelled by signifiers from the WRP[1]. The uses of generalized forms such as world religions are obvious when the lens of observation is focused on representing majority religious traditions. But, politically and ethically it is not acceptable to overlook minority voices. Injunctions against omission by oversight according to gender, ethnicity or age, as much as warnings to observe the processes of power, to listen for the voice of the subaltern, as well as challenges for inclusive and wide representation of all, require the scholar of religion to specifically pay attention to minorities. The WRP and focus on majority groupings of religion are open to each of these injunctions and challenges.

In a remarkable text, *The World's Religions in Figures* (2013), Todd Johnson and Brian Grim collate and analyse a significant range of data to examine the global scope of what they term the 'major religions'. Their selection of major religions is: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese folk-religion, Judaism and ethnoreligions (2013, 74 fn. 1). They are wary of world religions as a category, stating that listing world religions alongside numerical data for each, 'is valuable as a succinct global summary, but if it is not expanded further, such listings become gross oversimplifications of what is in fact a vast global complex of thousands of distinct and different religions' (2013, 137). Yet, it should be questioned whether 'major religion' is little more than a synonym for world religion. Are these just different ways of describing the same phenomena? Or are they significantly different as means of representing these phenomena? How are scholars to describe and define either major or minor traditions? Undergraduates require a framework by which they come to understand that categories and taxonomies are ways of packing up data – from this point they can begin to unpack, or more accurately, 'unmask' the effective elements and affective consequences of categories such as WRP.

This chapter employs a pedagogical perspective in the critical re-evaluation of the WRP. It describes a process of de-schooling and re-schooling a ubiquitous structure within the discourse. In a radical re-visioning of education, Ivan Illich has described the process of 'de-schooling society' (1971, 1973a). Schools and universities, he argued, are ideologically designed to reproduce a social system that is inequitable, excludes marginality and should on these terms alone be de-constructed. Moreover, 'the school system inculcates its own universal acceptance' (1973b, 97). By analogy it may be that the WRP is in process of being de-schooled, decommissioned, as not fit-for-purpose. It has created its own 'universal acceptance' which must be carefully unpicked from the discourse. Unpicked and unthreaded

it may be discarded, or its overarching remit may be demoted to a loose descriptive term. There is also a pedagogical imperative in Illich's prescription to 'question the nature of some certainty' (1973b, foreword), to teach the freedom to challenge – and in the case of this chapter, it is both the freedom to challenge the WRP *and* the freedom to challenge that challenge and assert the value of the category minus it's prescriptive characteristics. Students should be encouraged to critically consider the WRP, to imagine a world without world religions, and to evaluate the value of maintaining or discarding this category.

Complex Learning: Pedagogical Processes in Category Constructions and Deconstructions

When I began teaching, twenty-five years ago, to secondary/high school level students in the UK, the programme for religious education lessons was based on a nineteenth century Tylorean evolutionary approach to religious development. The first year of study examined ancient and dead religions; the second year polytheistic religions; the third year monotheist religions, culminating in Christianity. This model was a strictly hierarchical representation of religious development within a Christian culture. This included an explicit assumption of historical development with the notion of a distinct progress from superstitious worldviews to rational belief systems. Pedagogy is often not about what is taught so much as how it is taught. There is implicit within curricula a model, or series of models, of what is 'out there'. Fortunately, pedagogy at secondary/high school levels of study has improved significantly in the UK with, for example, the establishment of Standard Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRE), influenced by useful organizations such as the SHAP Working Party on World Religions in Education and the Religious Education Council. But evolutionary positivism in the study of religions has been superseded by the WRP, and school curricula now have an endemic model of world religions. The model retains its power in undergraduate

curricula and the resources that support them. This point is neatly exemplified by a chapter sub-title of a teaching text, *World Religions Today*: 'The Great Transition: From Tribal Life to Urban Life and the Emergence of World Religions' (Esposito et al. 2007, 15). Complex learning in the twenty-first century requires approaches that problematize meta-theories and models such as the WRP.

The model of the WRP is a linguistic sign not only of what is 'out there in the real world' but also of human desire to make meaning, and to structure the multiplicity of phenomena into order to simplify through classificatory systems. This human desire is both social and psychological:

> The models by which meaning is constructed are derived from, and produced within, social bodies, by their members who are themselves shaped by historical and social concerns. Humans develop models by which to encode and comprehend existence. Models allow us to make sense and shape the world(s) in which we live. (Juschka 2012, 55)

The psychology of pedagogic practice recognizes that students seek patterns of certainty and simplicity that such models afford. But challenging the desire for certainty and simplicity is a core ambition for teachers. Thus, as we teach typologies, categories and terminology – those models that provide certainty and simplifying structure – we unmask their effects and bring about uncertainty anew. Even the generic terms by which religious insiders and academic scholars of religion label these traditions have a simplifying structure. Thus when Johnson and Grim identify Christianity, Islam and Hinduism as 'major religions', they simplify into singularity that which is diverse and disparate. One way of countering this is by simply adopting plurality in the term, to challenge monolithic labels – see for example Corrywright and Morgan where the discussion of 'grouping religions' both challenges the WRP and

presents varied religious groupings as Christianities, Islams and Hinduisms (2006, 18ff.). It is an approach that can have significant social affects - for example in correcting the potentially dangerous, stereotyping monolithic representations of Islam in common media as identified in the Runymede Trust report on Islamophobia (2004). One important facet of complex learning is to emphasize plurality and difference. Another feature is to challenge the desire for simplicity and the concrete.

For the pedagogue introducing the study of religions to new students, there are resources aplenty to prise open the processes of category construction. These can be presented as vignettes, small studies. Outlining the processes, historical and intellectual, of the construction of a model or a category can also be the beginning of a deconstructive process. The tools of deconstruction are manifold. But just as the teacher defines the architecture of construction, so he or she must provide a framework for deconstruction. Some foundational theory that shows the contingent nature of knowledge and intellectual history is necessary. This requires neither a nuanced social constructionist philosophy nor a full-blown relativism, merely some foundations in the constructive effects of human understanding of the world. Possible beginnings may include Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's influential text *The Medium is the Massage* (1967, reprint 1996) and the important discussions that arise from their assertion that 'the book is an extension of the eye'. Another departure point may be a consideration of Marxist critique of the social functions of religion and the specific historical and social contexts of these functions (see Tremlett in this volume). The keystone of such sample starting points is for students to recognize (and challenge) the assumption that there is an external empirical category of 'religion', which is global and a-historical, and comprised of world religions. The next cognitive step for students is to recognize that positivist presumptions in the order of knowledge underlie the WRP. The world of religions, it is

assumed, is defined by an accumulation of knowledge, out of which the category ‘world religion’ emerges. Yet, the history of ideas shows that knowledge is contingent on its cultural contexts. What is known is limited not only by the unknown, but manipulated by power relations, through political, economic, social and cultural means, that make representations of the world according to their interests. Thus students must learn to unlearn in a complex interplay of assertion and challenge to the very categories which, in part, construct the subject of their learning.

There is a tension in category construction between groups and individuals, types and specific instances, multiplicity and singularity, and between association and differentiation. Recognition occurs at many levels, inductive and deductive: we recognize types or groups and then specificities within those types, or, from specific instances, we recognize ‘types’. Academic study leads to a sophisticated process of recognition which identifies difference and multiple identities and that combats simplistic identifications according to generic categories. However, academic discourse includes varied layers of recognition, that accord phenomena varied levels of categorization. We might define these different levels of understanding as orders of knowledge. Recognising the hierarchical structures of orders of knowledge, and the categories that play within them, is an important facet of complex learning. It is also a key mode in discourse analysis and Foucauldian unmasking. Foucault uses a splendid example of categories from the imagination of Jorge Luis Borges to illustrate how the process of ordering and labelling the world is culturally contingent:

> This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair

> brush, (l) *et cetera* , (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. …the thing we apprehend in one great leap … of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own' (Foucault 1974, preface, xvi)

So students come to understand that the WRP offers a classificatory system which arises in a specific social context. But they fall ever again into simple label-object correspondence. They may even repeat a tale from another early seminar class, where I explain the importance of different academic subject areas investigating religions, using the story of the six blind men and the elephant. These students may aver that the blind men represent differing classificatory systems but they are all *of* the elephant. Three ripostes may scotch this naïve theory of correspondence. First, a brief consideration of the taxonomical system of biological sciences of classification according to domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species, seems to offer a very robust taxonomy. But, as biologist Stephen Jay Gould has shown, different systems of identification can result in radically different categorizations within the taxonomy (in McCutcheon's measured and careful consideration of religion and classification (2007, 65-71)[2]. A second response may be to consider Ludwig Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit and what kind of thing it is. From different perspectives and depending on the prevailing identificatory system it is a duck or it is a rabbit. Lengthy class discussions may ensue on classification and taxonomies. But it is not either thing at all. It is a board squiggle, a representation, which is either, both or none of these things. Representation is not reality, neither are classificatory systems such as the WRP. Third, we do not challenge the existence of real elephants for the issue is not ontic, to do with their existence, or non-existence, but epistemic, what we know about them and how we respond to their existence. The lenses of perception, such as the WRP, structure what is perceived and how it is accorded significance.

Classificatory systems and taxonomies provide paradigms of understanding phenomena that are, in fact, representations, and which are subject to change. T. S Kuhn provides the seminal outline for the notion of paradigm creation and subsequent shifts (1970) which is appropriate to understanding the historical role of WRP and its functions as a representation of religiosity. WRP is in fact an example, *par excellence*, of a paradigm in the process of changing. The notion of a paradigm is also well exemplified by the shift in pedagogy itself, from a model of didactic delivery of concepts and knowledge (where learners are consumers) to one where students at undergraduate level are encouraged to be producers of knowledge, even co-contributors to learning.

Teaching and learning in the twenty-first century is a complicated melange of partially effective old models, such as the lecture format – see Bligh (1971) and Gibbs (2013) – and varied novel teaching strategies – see, for example, Ronald Barnett's notion of a 'learning-amid-contestation' epoch in pedagogy (2011). Complexity in teaching approaches is met by complexity of learning. In the lecture-seminar-class room, the WRP is a paradigm that can be discussed and challenged in multifarious and nuanced ways. But among historical and current resources in academic study of religions WRP resonates as a common universal category. It is, as noted above, commonly found in textbooks for the study of religions. Moreover, a quick internet search reveals wide usage of the WRP. Teachers in the study of religions must be careful curators of the resources on the Internet. Students are efficient navigators of this territory, whose trajectories of discovery are constrained by their own (lack of) knowledge and the curious, and instrumental, algorithms of search engines. Internet search terms and associated links use 'shorthands' such as 'world religions' that can undermine the careful pedagogy of the classroom. For teachers of religion in the new world of learning it is a challenging process of leading students through a super-abundance of information and

providing direction against a dissipating category. For students of religion the complexity of perspectives and the lack of firm knowledge bring about uncomfortable uncertainty in a shifting landscape of knowledge.

Complex learning then arises from the pedagogic assumption that key changes in sources and access to them, and changing modes of delivery, from globalized opportunities for travel to e-learning and Massive Open Online Courses, point to new kinds of learning experience in higher education. Equally, greater levels of student engagement and increased emphasis on students as knowledge producers lead to a model of complex learning and require a review of pedagogical approaches (for a fuller discussion of these transforming modes of pedagogic practice in the study of religions see Corrywright (2013)). It is in this context that the overarching trope of the World Religions model is dissolving in academic literature and yet requires further unmasking as it is asserted and then unpicked by students.

Teaching Strategies: Sorting and Sifting the Formations and Locations of Religion

Two object lessons in the study of religions are presented here as examples of topics and teaching tasks that unmask WRP. The first task can be completed within the space of a single lecture/seminar session in the first year of an undergraduate programme. The second topic is designed for an Honours level class, reiterating the importance of course structure to return to the task of unpicking WRP throughout a curriculum over each level of study. Such teaching tasks are of course layered and complex – they are lessons about the broader academic study of religions and opportunities to introduce and discuss concept schemes, terminology and tropes within the tradition of the study.

In Practise: Formations

The students are presented with fifty laminated cards. The cards are each labelled from an apparently arbitrary set of ‘names’ of religious traditions, worldviews, titles and descriptors of religions. The students are asked first simply to organize the cards according to whatever taxon they deem appropriate and to reflect on the cognitive processes they adopt in deciding which category system to adopt. The first, often unconsciously adopted system is simply based on recognition between known/unknown, that which is recognized and that which is alien. Other first systems of organization are binary – live/dead, major/minor, monotheist/polytheist, religious/non-religious. The pile of ‘unknown’ religions or groups is often quite significant (an object lesson in itself of the amount students have to learn in the course of their studies). Quite quickly most groups of students will move toward the overweening model of world religions gained through lower level studies or the implicit deep presence of the WRP. Thus they will find titles of world religions and begin to group labelled cards under these category headings. This category system is most frequently offered by students as the most robust system. Though they are confounded by where to locate the term ‘Orthodox’ (under Christianity or Judaism), or ‘Tantra’ (under Buddhism or Hinduism), are not sure at all where to put either ‘Mormonism’ or ‘Latter Day Saints’ and profess failure at the significant pile of other labels from ‘Candomble’ to ‘Marxism’, ‘Orphism’ to ‘New Atheism’.

One purpose of the exercise is made explicit to students at this stage in the seminar: card-sorting is a sorting not of the things themselves but of categories. A secondary point, one core to the project of research in the study of religions, is elucidated by Craig Martin’s binary that ‘the process of labelling or naming is a secondary process, and one that does not change the nature of the thing named’ (2012, 19). It is a pedagogical imperative that students understand the constructed nature of such category systems. It is also vital that students in study of

religions are introduced early to the contested areas of category construction and the implications of taxonomic systems, and that these labels and categories have real functional impact on those they purport to describe. The issue is particularly well described by Clifford Geertz:

> As to whether particular analyses (which come in the form of taxonomies, paradigms, tables, trees and other ingenuities) reflect what the natives 'really' think or are merely clever simulations, logically equivalent but substantially different, of what they think (1973, 11).

In a teaching conceit the seminar leader assumes that there are world religions and discussion focuses on which are the world religions and what characterizes them. At this stage in undergraduate studies the primary criteria presented are often, simply, size and spread. The students are provided with a map of the world and asked to place labels onto the areas where they originated. The question-begging consequences of the task are clearly evident in the limited locations of the origins and the significant empty spaces across the world. Key questions about *who* is not represented, and *why* these religions and cultures are not represented, powerfully undermine the apparently global model of the WRP. It will be suggested that world religions have historically become so, that origins do not define a world religion, but rather the dispersal and growth of a religion accorded the title 'world religion'. The importance of synchronic and diachronic representations can be introduced to this process of concept mapping and category construction. The snapshot of world religions at their origins or in their current existence belies their existence as 'world religion'. At what point in its historical development does a religion become a world religion? Who decides? Historicising the establishment, growth and end of a religious tradition makes the category of world religion lose its descriptive efficacy. Moreover, a diachronic perspective which examines the growth of a religion through evangelism and colonial expansion, provides a

hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the hidden authority and authenticity accorded to religious groupings that self-define as world religions.

There are many possible extensions and further directions to this seminar task. Three example areas include: firstly, discussion of possible alternative categories and labels that could replace ‘world religion’. The constitutive elements of a definition of ‘religion’ are also, in part, those of ‘world religion’. Thus, discussion of Ninian Smart’s notion of ‘worldviews’ and his permissive structure of the varied ‘dimensions of religion’ are appropriate to critical reflection on the WRP (1998; 1999). Equally, the notion of ‘family resemblances’ between religious groupings and within groupings can be examined as the key mode within which criteria are defined for the category of religion. The idea of a world religion becomes obsolete with these foci. Secondly, this can lead to a consideration of the Weberian/Troeltschean Church-denomination-sect-cult typology widely used in sociology of religion. The typology provides both a synchronic representation on the varied elements within a major religious grouping and diachronic perspective that can show how a sect or cult becomes a ‘Church’. Flawed though this typology can be, the concept of a ‘church’ does not require the WRP. Thirdly, the hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the self-defining element of world religions leads to an unmasking of historical and contemporary religious expansion, (neo)-colonial appropriations and hegemony over the discourse of religion itself.

In Practise: Locations

Examining the locations of religion also provides an inroad and challenge to the WRP at a higher level of undergraduate study. A series of seminar sessions examining contemporary religious contexts and practices provides an opportunity to reconsider some important concepts in the study of religions and to challenge the universalising tendency of the WRP.

Locations are defined for students as both the 'materiality of place' and 'social contexts'. Students are asked to discuss and identify the locations of the 'sacred' in contemporary 'secular' cultures. Two responses are common to this question of location: first, everywhere, or anywhere humans are to be found (in societies and cultures); second, specific places, constructed and deemed 'sacred' by religious traditions – both are points to be developed in the subsequent discussion (below). Students are then provided with two short readings, from *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) and *Dover Beach* (1867).

A useful illustration of this dual perception of universality (everywhere and in specific religiously nominated places) is exemplified in the first reading taken from John G. Niehardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). Black Elk is describing his mystic vision:

> I looked ahead and saw the mountains there with rocks and forests on them and from the mountains flashed all colours upward to the heavens. Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shape of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all things as they must live together like one being (1932, 42-3)

Niehardt adds a key footnote to this section, that while Black Elk stated he was on Harney Peak in the Black Hills of Dakota he added, 'But anywhere is the center of the world' (ibid). This perennialist notion of essential religious unity is usefully exemplified by essentialist scholars such as Mircea Eliade, whose concept of *hierophany* suggests that any place can be the location of the sacred. It is a theme which also underpins the WRP – that there are entities, world religions, which have the same essential identity, regardless of place or time.

Despite the many valid critiques of Eliade's universalising tendencies, the universal perception of the place of the sacred is a common trope for both religious insiders and in common discourse about the WRP, which assumes that transportation, or diaspora, may affect borderland structures and expressions, but does not affect the essential criteria of the WRP. The perennial perspective implied by the notion of 'world religions' is usefully challenged by the formations and locations of contemporary 'alternative spiritualities'. There has been a shift in focus for many in alternative spiritualities from the other-worldly transcendental to this-worldly self-transformation. As Peter Berger has suggested – contra his own significant model of 'the sacred canopy' (1967) – 'the other world, which religion located in a transcendental reality, is now introjected within human consciousness itself' (cited in Heelas 2008, 237). Alongside this 'inward turn', there has been a movement away from the salvific emphasis of some traditional religions to a this-worldly internal focus on transformation (see Chen 2006). Moreover, there has also been a shift from religious practice in religious buildings to more diversified locations, including virtual- and social media-based locations.

In studies of religions, those indicators that serve to maintain the WRP – events such as pilgrimages, calendric religious observances, festivals and holy days, and places such as shrines, temples, buildings, edifices and sites – indicate the regular practical observance of religious ideology in the 'traditional' world religions. Yet much of the phenomena of religious practice and expression is hidden, a dark matter outside the construction of the WRP, comprising informal networks, diffuse, non-localized communities and dissipating structures.

Students are asked to consider how religion and secularity stand in relation to each other in contemporary culture. Some background reading and discussion about secularism, secularity and secularization is required. Students are then presented with the second text. When Matthew Arnold wrote about the tidal withdrawal of the 'sea of faith' in *Dover Beach* in 1867, he was reflecting a social and intellectual *Zeitgeist* of fear about the declining role of religion.

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.
>
> (From *Dover Beach*)

A century later secularization theory was in its hey-day, with Bryan Wilson's strident claims about the steamroller of secularization in his publication, *Religion in Secular Society* (1966), Yet even then, there were challenges by other sociologists of religion on the meaning and significance of secularising processes (see, for example, Fox 2005). Equally there were a range of new formations, or new theories about religious formations, that suggested differentiated religious expression in secular society. Secularization itself, it should be recognized, has been a universal category in sociology of religion, now effectively differentiated in many ways according to local, social, historical and cultural contexts. It is in these contexts of place within secular culture that the growth of communities of alternative

religiosity is a significant indicator of change in the practices of religious adherents and the locations of their practice.

Students are asked to consider how religious communities function, how they establish traditions, how they are inter-linked and in what ways they create order. Notions of hierarchy, traditions, law and power are evident in early discussions of the structure of communities within religions. This is one aspect of the prevailing model of WRP. But many non-traditional, historical and contemporary communities do not conform to the model. The notion of 'diffuse communities' is a significant concept in understanding the informal networks of new formations of religion such as on social media, new and alternative spiritualities. These religious 'communities' are often fragmented non-localized networks. The network connections of diffuse communities are not as strong or easily identifiable as formal and geographically specific communities. Relationships in these diffuse communities, between individuals, organizations, and even systems of belief, are not clearly identifiable as nomothetic 'facts' or rules. The relationships of the diffuse communities of alternative spiritualities are subject to flux, development and change; they appear to be structurally weak. The relationships of formal systems and communities of WRP are more static and fixed; they appear to be strong. One might analogize that this theory of the difference between the structured, established communities evident within the WRP and diffuse communities is similar to the physicists search for a unified field theory – where once the distinction between 'weak forces' and 'strong forces' led scientists to prioritise strong forces and overlook the highly significant weak energetic forces.

In comparison to the bold existence of world religions, these diffuse communities may seem to be fading communities. But the paradigm of thought for this perspective is entropic. That

is to say, communities are considered to be in dissolution and the diffuse communities of the new and alternative spiritualities merely exemplify this process of dissolution. Theorists of postmodernity, who rely on the concepts of 'fracture', 'fragmentation' and 'dissolution', function in an entropic world view which, ironically, is a feature of the paradigm of old positivist science. However, an alternative scientific paradigm is available in Ilya Prigogine's notion of 'dissipative structures' (1997). In essence, Prigogine's argument, which was applied to chemical processes (and for which he won the Nobel Prize in 1977), explains the movement from simple to higher order structures. Certain structures are 'closed' systems, where there is no internal transformation. Other structures, such as living beings and cultural systems, Prigogine has noted, contain continually transforming energy. This energy and the complexity of these structures lead to instability, but instead of collapse and entropy, the systems move into a higher order. These systems are 'dissipative structures'. The diffuse communities of the alternative spiritualities can then be seen as potentially indicative of such a shift to higher order, or we may simply say, non-hierarchically, *different* order structures of community.

Conclusion: Charging at Windmills

We may take our proverbial horses to water, but they may not drink. When Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested in 1962 that the word 'religion' be discarded in favour of 'tradition', his reasoning was very sound. But, over half a century later, the word resonates with as much vigour as it ever has. Might it be that challengers of the WRP are Quixotically tilting at quintains; moreover, which spin in eternal return? Insiders of the major, and even minor, religions have vested interests in identifying their tradition as a 'world religion', while the shorthand 'world religion' in common discourse seems to point to a recognizable thing. It may be that, akin to Prigogine's dissipative structures, the paradigm and the term World

Religion is adapting to a new theoretical environment which challenges the old model. 'The WRP is dead, long live the WRP!' We may further deduce that use is meaning or the Lewis Carroll Humpty-Dumpty principle – '"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less"' (Carroll 1871, Chapter VI). The WRP is a model that can be stripped of its pejorative historical elements, its usage limited to shorthand for major traditions and religions with global spread. But to do this requires a sophisticated and complex understanding of the historical functions of the WRP. What appeared clear and concrete is in fact muddy and contested. As Jeppe Jensen has expressed, 'Even the seemingly simple class of "world religions" has turned out to be a matter of ambiguity and religious apologetics' (2014, 50). It is indeed a tricky time to be a student.

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[1] Examples of such a coloured maps, which are defined by most adherents in each region, can be found in *Atlas of Global Christianity* Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R Ross (2009:6-7) *World Religions Today* (3rd Edition) by John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching and Todd Lewis (xv1-xv11 and 4) and *Many People, Many Faiths: Women and Men in the World Religions* (ninth edition) by Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw (2009: 6-7)

[2] McCutcheon is decidedly less mealy-mouthed in his description of taxonomic schemes in the study of religions as a 'dog's breakfast' (2003: 83-97)